

¶Do not abuse words.

## THE LANGUAGE ZOO

FIRST borne by the stork, man in his early stages creeps and crawls and squawks and squeaks until he becomes a little pig. Later in life he is a poor fish and a sucker, but often acquires horse sense. Road hogs flourish, and the early bird gets the worm. Some people look sheepish, act like crawfish, or they grouse and growl, or snap like turtles. Some men are bull-headed; others are cow-licked. Husbands have lived to be mere insects. Occasionally one meets a consummate ass. We have wise old owls and sly old foxes. The eagle-eyed prey upon their fellow men. Sometimes a dirty dog runs amuck. Kangaroo-courts are common. Clodhoppers hop and jaywalkers walk. But most of us get stung without a bee in sight.

The female of the species is more deadly than the male. Old maids get cattish, and maids that are not so old, kittenish. Men are sharks, old bears, or wolves in sheep's clothing, and pull the wool over our eyes. We lionize heroes, and everybody knows some old crab, some dumb cow, or some silly goose. Men are lobsters; the wise ones shut up in season like oysters or clams; or, like

snails, they draw back into their shells. Every country-seat has its courthouse rats; everytown has its chickens and old hens. The whole human world is infested with parasites.

We develop elephantiasis, horse's neck, Charlie horse, and a whale of a lot of other things. We are land-lubbers and sea-dogs, turtle-doves and otherwise fine birds, such as lame ducks or early birds. We are dark horses, hunks of cheese, little shrimps, and mites, so often wiggle out of things. We do the goose-step, the turkey-trot, and the camel-walk while we get a hump on ourselves. We have our bear-cats, ham-actors, and jackleg lawyers. We sing like canaries, laugh like hyenas, grin like Cheshire cats, shed crocodile tears, and hound and buffalo one another. We are stubborn as mules, slick as eels, but often have to pony up. We are the biggest toad in the puddle or the smallest tadpole in the pond. We make 'em pigeon-toed, walrus-toothed, pug-nosed, monkey-faced, chicken-hearted, and cock-eyed; and all of us are more or less cuckoo. Finally, we sing our swan song and croak. Isn't the science of words wonderful?

Some people work words to death. Nowadays one never devises a plan; it is always *evolved*. Among many over-used words is *proposition*. Not content with using it to drive *proposal* into oblivion, its devotees employ it to identify anything from a condition to a person. "He's a difficult *proposition*" is actually said by persons who regard their English as passable, while its substitution for "problem," "situation," "matter," and even "prospect," is common. Here's the latest gem that has been left at my door—"I *contacted* Jones and *propositioned* him, but he *suspected* me of trying to double-cross him."

First the people *focused* their attention on the important subject of immigration when they might have *concentrated* it and have been better understood. Next they toyed with the word *mobilize*, and they *mobilized* credit, *mobilized* gold, *mobilized* bank reserves, and on the *mobilization* established a Central Reserve Bank.

A few years ago, the term *intrigue* was mistreated by writers of English prose. Dozens of the budding novelists thought they were wanting in literary style if they did not crowd in somewhere that they were *intrigued* by a thought, an

action, a spectacle, or some dubious behavior.

This was followed by *emerge*. Once a man used to *come out of a room*. He rarely does so nowadays; he *emerges*. He *emerges* from a train; from a plane, and even from a parachute. One amateur got him even to *emerge* into a room.

Among the other words that have been "done almost to death" with us are *alibi* and *sophisticated*. The man who remembers his Latin resents *alibi* when used as if it meant "excuse," for it means "other-or else-where," and in law is the plea of *being somewhere else*.

The absurd length to which some persons will go is best illustrated by the ridiculous associations in which the word *sophisticated* is found. To speak or write of *sophisticated* furniture, calories, or peppermints is foolish even as it is to do so of a *sophisticated* countryside. In fact, to use the word *sophisticated* in any sense but relation to an individual is silly.

If words are what the poet Donne once described them to be, "the subtlest and most delicate outward creatures composed of thoughts and breaths," we should remember that they are our best means with which to win our way in life.—*Dr. Frank Vizetelly, condensed from a public address.*